

Collect

Sunday Observer  
magazine

AUSTRALIA'S ONLY PERMANENT EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMING ENSEMBLE

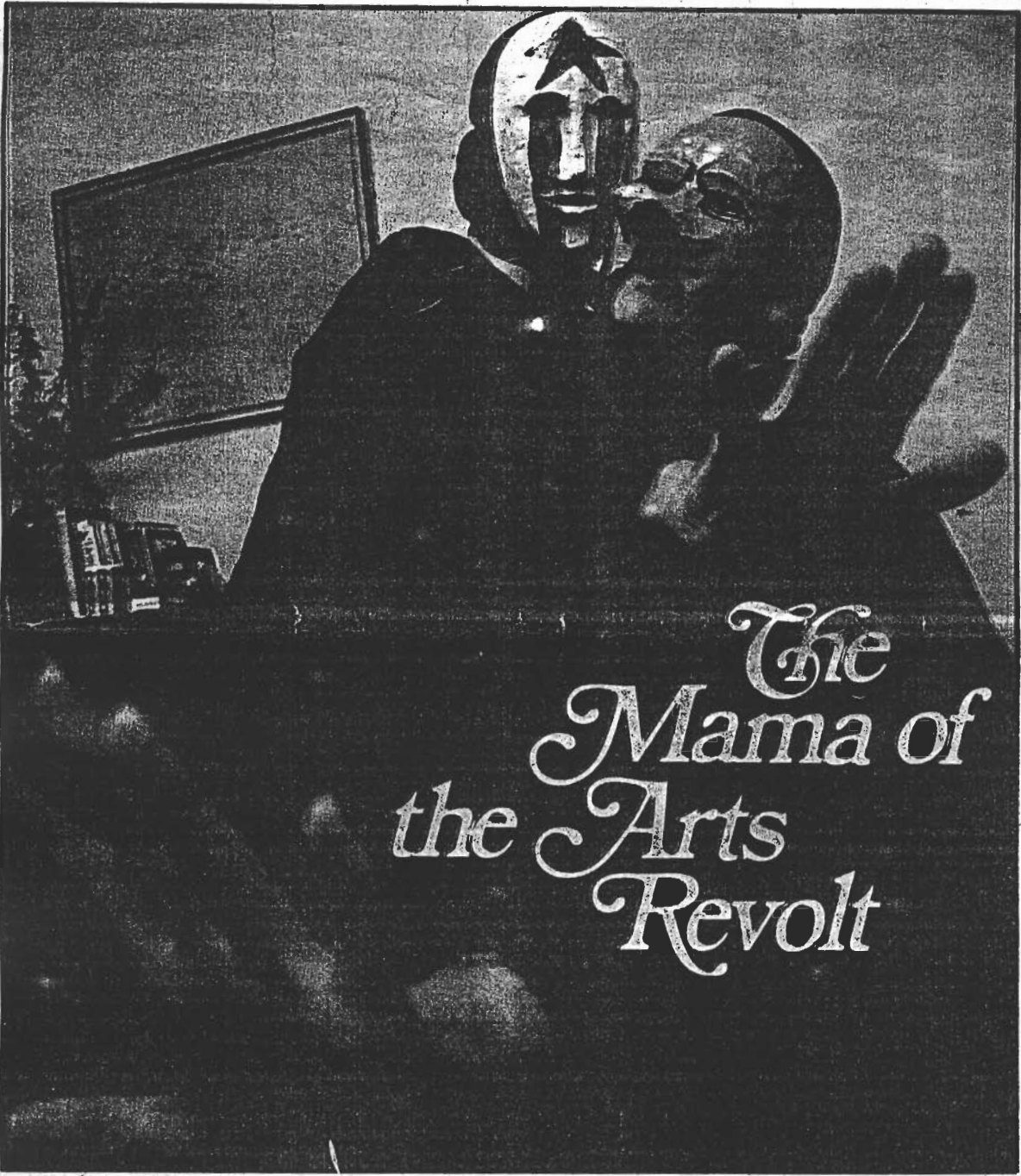
# LA MAMA COMPANY



*The  
Mama of  
the Arts  
Revolt*

PAGES 18, 19

STORY: MICHAEL COSTIGAN  
 LAYOUT: ROGER HAMMOND  
 PICTURES: RAY DREW, BILL VEITCH  
 AND JOHN MARZELLA



# The Mama of the Arts Revolt

**LA MAMA** is a fecund lady. In a couple of years, she has mothered a whole new generation of poets, actors, writers and rock-scene entertainers. The vitality of Carlton's small theatre-poetry hall-coffee house continues to amaze.

Until now, La Mama has virtually had the field to herself in Melbourne.

But two fresh "scenes", one probably to be located in a North Melbourne hall and the other in South Yarra, are about to be set up.

They will give young poets, musicians, playwrights, directors and actors further opportunities to develop the talents which they have been exercising at La Mama.

More commodious than the old lady of Faraday St., the new centres will be better equipped to satisfy one of the strongest aspirations of the La Mama circle — to integrate all the arts under one roof.

Several well attended meetings have discussed plans for the "arts co-operative". An all-night concert on May 8, featuring rock groups, poets, musicians, films, magic and plays, will help to finance the venture.

If all goes according to plan, the co-operative will launch its "arts laboratory" within the next two months.

Before May, the Babajan centre in South Yarra will open for business.

It is a combined bookshop, art gallery, handicrafts workshop and entertainment centre, named after an Indian mystic who reportedly died at the age of 140.

In the meanwhile, La Mama's own writing and publishing boom continues.

The latest news is that city publishers are about to produce not one, but two paperbacks, each deriving largely from activities at the former Carlton shirt factory.

The first is a selection of plays, edited by Graeme Blundell, 24-year-old director of the Australian Performing Group (formerly the La Mama Players).

It will include plays by Jack Hibbert, Alexander Buzo and John Romeril, three of the Australian theatre's most promising young writers. Most of the plays have been tested and developed in workshops and audience-participation performances at La Mama.

The second paperback is a poetry anthology edited by Charles Buckmaster, 20.

More than a dozen young poets will be represented in the book.

"Each poet will have about 20 pages, which will give some possibility of a fair assessment of their work," Buckmaster says.

Several of the poems were first



**IN SEMICIRCLE:** Graeme Blundell (Rod) and Kerry Dwyer (*The Girl in White With Wire Wheels*).

**ABOVE LEFT:** In colored masks, Kerry Dwyer and Graeme Blundell rehearse.

**ABOVE:** Kerry Dwyer, one of the founding members of the Australian Performing Group wears a clown's mask and red helmet.

**FAR LEFT:** Graeme Blundell, in his part as Rod in *White With Wire Wheels*.

**LEFT:** These masks are part of the equipment collected by the group.





published in the roneoed mini-magazines which have proliferated in the past two years.

Charles Buckmaster left school in his matriculation year after being involved in a difference of opinion with the authorities over his long hair.

He is one of the better known of the young poets who have been reading their works at La Mama on Tuesday nights since September, 1968.

He works in a timber yard. The La Mama boom all happened so quickly.

Betty Burstall, wife of Eltham film-maker Tim Burstall, came back to Australia from New York in 1967 and looked around for a way of introducing the kind of off-off-Broadway coffee-house theatre she had seen in Greenwich Village.

Her aspirations coincided with the searchings of a university-centred theatrical group.

Flushed with the success of their production *Brainrot*, written by medical student Jack Hibbert, they wanted to continue to do their own thing without the inhibitions imposed by the downtown bourgeois theatre's "elitist concept".

La Mama was the answer.

The theatre group, with strong emphasis on teamwork, began their workshops at La Mama and presented their first production in mid-1968.

Audiences appreciated the intimacy of the new playhouse, and the opportunity to be part of the presentation and to mingle with the players. They didn't mind hard chairs and smoke-stained walls.

During 1969, the La Mama Players became increasingly concerned with the use of street theatre to highlight social and political issues.

They took part in the May Day procession, presenting lightning sketches at street-corners, and in July 4 demonstrations.

During the Prahran Council elections, a group of players performed on the pavement in crowded Chapel St. When police appeared on the scene, they found themselves incorporated into the act.

In December, they did a factory tour, presenting a 20-minute play, highly critical of big business and employers, outside factory gates during lunch-hour.

The group has now changed its name to the Australian Performing Group.

They are planning another factory tour at the end of April and are hoping to interest more schools in their activities.

"This is a living, vital communal operation," Graeme Blundell says.

"The plays in our repertoire are as good as any being done overseas.

"But we see a danger in dissipating our energies by becoming a universal professional protest theatre".

On September 3, 1968, the new wave poets moved in to La Mama.

Led by poet Kris Hemensely, from the Isle of Wight, they began meeting on Tuesday nights for free poetry readings.

Like the performing group, the poets are anti-establishment.

They consider that the literary scene in Australia is dominated by an entrenched "in-group".

They disregard recognised poetic forms and produce work at a fast pace in response to the immediate situation.

More than 100 young poets throughout Australia are part of this recent movement.

The quality of their output is extremely variable, but the phenomenon is remarkable.

Though Kris Hemensely returned to England last year, the momentum of the movement in Melbourne has not slackened.

Mimeographed poetry magazines have been appearing in Melbourne at the rate of about one a month over the past year or two.

Some have a short life, but editors never seem to be short of copy.

One of the best-known magazines is *Crosscurrents*, edited by Michael Dugan.

But the young poets are not lost in self-admiration.

The editor of *Mok*, an Adelaide magazine, last year tilted at "pseudopoetry and meaningless words".

"The greatest problem on the so-called Australian Underground scene seems to be a distinct lack of something to say," he wrote in an editorial.

"There are too many young people apparently writing completely aimlessly and too many using words in formalist, abstract

compositions rather than as sensitive means of communication.

"Most of our poetry is meaningless and therefore valueless to anyone other than ourselves and our friends."

Ian Robertson, editor of *Flagstones*, wrote at the end of last year that "the poetry is still coming and we are beginning to question each other and ourselves more closely".

Forty or 50 people attend the La Mama poetry nights every week.

The atmosphere is informal and everybody seems to enjoy themselves.

On a recent evening, the two readers were summoned from a nearby hotel bar, where they had been fortifying themselves against possible attacks of nerves.

They handed out mimeographed sheets before the readings began.

On paper, much of the poetry was unintelligible. But it was read with captivating earnestness and a sense of sound. Some of the lines carried the echoes of tinkling bells.

One of the poets broke periodically into song, concocted riddles and made jokes.

Both warmed to the task, when they sensed that somehow they were really communicating with the eager audience.

"They are charismatic," said one young member of the audience during the coffee break.

Afterwards, the floor was available to anyone with a poem to read.

Informality is the keynote at La Mama — but it is not necessarily synonymous with badly-prepared or shoddy presentations.

Foundress Betty Burstall is confident that La Mama has a future.

Whether or not her optimism is justified, she can certainly claim credit for making a notable contribution to the youth culture of the age of Aquarius.



ABOVE: Bill Garner and Kerry Dwyer from the La Mama production of Jack Hibbert's play, *White With Your Wheels*.

LEFT: Bill Garner, Graeme Blundell and Jon Hawkes in a scene from the same play.

RIGHT AND BELOW RIGHT: Student poets Alistair Spate and Kris Mann

BELOW LEFT: A youthful audience gathers to hear Kris Mann (foreground) and Alistair Spate reading poems.

